
Secret Keeping as Female Empowerment in Marcel Prévost's *Le jardin secret*

HOPE CHRISTIANSEN
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

*"Oh, what a tangled web we weave
When first we practise to deceive!"*
—*Marmion*, Sir Walter Scott

Perhaps Marcel Prévost is best known for his novels about virgins. His 1894 *Les demi-vierges* depicts the detrimental effects of education and Parisian life on young women; his 1900 *Les vierges fortes* experiments with the idea of a community of women teachers "only to explode it," according to Louise Lyle, "as an empty ideal" (60).¹ In *Le jardin secret* he narrates the story of Marthe Lecoudrier, a woman who suddenly discovers evidence that Jean, her husband and fifteen years her senior, has long led a double life. Her initial reaction is to hire a private investigator who can obtain proof of Jean's adultery before she proceeds to divorce him. The discovery of her husband's infidelity leads her to an intensive examination of her past that resurrects her former self, referred to in the novel as "la Marthe d'autrefois" ("the old Marthe"); it forces her to acknowledge that she too has long engaged in secret-keeping.² Prévost centers his novel, a first-person narrative skewed toward the confessional and punctuated with flashbacks and occasional entries from Marthe's journal, on the theme of secrecy. He shows it not as a destructive force, but as one of empowerment that affords the heroine a modicum of agency at a time when there was little to be had for a woman with scarce means and even fewer meaningful role models.³

In the novel's opening scene, Marthe is alone with Yvonne, her sleeping eleven-year-old daughter. For the first time in thirteen years of marriage, her husband leaves her to return to his home village to take care of a recently deceased uncle's inheritance. Ill at ease without him, she realizes, even before setting out on her fateful journey of self-discovery, just how much she has changed since marriage. She now realizes that "la Marthe d'autrefois" loved her solitude, "savait l'animer si bien par la pensée personnelle intense, par le travail, par la lecture, par le rêve!" 'knew how to bring it to life with intense private thoughts, work, reading, and dreams!' (6). But, once married, Marthe stopped having thoughts of her own; it takes Jean's physical absence for "[u]ne région confuse où ma pensée ne pénètre jamais" 'an obscure place where my thoughts never go' to beckon to her "avec un attrait un peu pervers, com-

me si, loin de mon mari, je pouvais m'y complaire, m'y réfugier sans danger de surprise" 'with an odd attraction, as if, far from my husband, I could find pleasure and refuge there, with no risk of being caught' (6-7). Although she is free to dream and to do as she wishes, she recognizes that marriage has extinguished her desire to do so. Elsewhere, Marthe describes herself as having been "plongée, depuis treize ans, dans un sommeil de Belle au bois dormant" 'deep in a Sleeping Beauty slumber for thirteen years' (6); Jean "anesthésie . . . tout un coin de moi. . . ." 'anesthetizes . . . a whole part of me . . .' (9). Later, she unflatteringly compares her marriage to that of two yoked oxen that develop a mutual affection because of their forced companionship and the resulting simultaneous movements; she then compares it to two trees growing so closely together that they end up sharing the same bark (46). Marcelle Tinayre offers a similar portrayal of marriage, equally tinged with bitterness, in *La femme et son secret*, a treatise on women:

What makes marriage last is when two individuals are so used to each other that the wife adopts her husband's ideas, opinions, likes and dislikes. All that was personal to the young woman—her ignored sad little desires, sad little aspirations, and sad little hidden treasure—disappears. (93-94)⁴

What complicates Marthe's epiphany is the fact that she is not particularly unhappy with her situation; she even fears those activities and experiences that once invigorated her. Proof of her ambivalence is her impulse to summon Jean to avoid having to endure, as she puts it, a tête-à-tête with "l'autre Marthe" (9), along with a revealing statement about having had eight years of "excellent ménage" 'excellent marriage' with him (45).⁵ As we will see, such contradictions run deep in a heroine seemingly intent on believing in what eventually proves to be an overly simplistic double identity involving a "before" and an "after" Marthe.

However "anesthetized," Marthe comes abruptly out of sedation when, impatiently awaiting the arrival of dawn to calm her frayed nerves, she is unable to resist the temptation of examining the contents of a drawer that her husband left partially open.⁶ There she finds the classic signs of adultery—rail tickets, dried flowers, portraits, and over fifty love letters (some steamy) from multiple women. She also finds documents attesting to the expenditure of thirty thousand francs, which she assumes that he has spent on his adulterous affairs. As the novel unfolds over the next three days and nights, we learn that this is but the tip of the iceberg; Jean has long kept troubling secrets regarding his family, such as a hereditary epilepsy that afflicts him and Yvonne and, Marthe suspects, that also caused the death of the aforementioned uncle, and, far more sobering, affects a son given up for adoption, now fifteen, born of the affair in progress when Jean had the op-

portunity to marry Marthe.

Aghast because of her husband's deceit, Marthe tries to calm herself by checking on her daughter, who is asleep with open eyes. Making a connection between "l'inconnu caché derrière ces prunelles d'enfant" 'the unknown in a child's eyes' and "l'inconnu des secrets surpris tout à l'heure" 'the unknown of the secrets that just revealed themselves to me', Marthe realizes that Yvonne is not only a being distinct from herself, but also "un secret que je ne connaîtrais jamais" 'a secret that I would never truly know' (15). For Marthe, the eyes are "le symbole du mystère dont s'enveloppe, pour nous, la pensée des autres" 'the symbol of the mystery veiling the thoughts of others'—neither mirrors nor windows, they are "une force agressive et violatrice" 'an aggressive and transgressive force' capable of penetrating without being penetrated (15). Between her discovery of Jean's secrets and the frightening realization that even an innocent child is likely to harbor them, Marthe concludes that secrets both define us and protect us from one another: "Tout ce qui n'est pas nous-même garde contre nous son secret" 'Anything that is not us keeps secrets from us' (15).

It soon becomes clear, however, that Marthe is an exception to her own rule: she has secrets that she has long kept even from herself; so neatly has she compartmentalized the various stages of her life (it has given her pleasure to "distribuer ma vie en époques moralement indépendantes les unes des autres: des morceaux d'êtres distincts avec des responsabilités distinctes" 'parcel out my life in periods that are morally independent from each other: bits of discreet beings with distinct responsibilities'), with marriage representing an indelible line of demarcation (25). To wit, the narrator occasionally mentions to have deliberately "forgotten" events from her premarital past. She never again opened the journal that, had she continued to keep it, might have documented the various stages of her transformation: "[j]'ai vécu résolument dans le présent," 'I have lived resolutely in the present' she says, "isolant de la 'Marthe d'autrefois' ma personne et ma responsabilité" 'isolating myself and my responsibilities from the "old Marthe"' (32). A rereading of the journal plays a critical role in dealing with Jean's secrets and coming to terms with those of her own; it confirms her personality metamorphosis of which Jean's absence has suddenly made her aware. As she leafs through the six notebooks and begins to write again (ostensibly creating the text before us), she is shocked by the dissonance between the "la personnalité . . . nette et forte, *violente*" 'the distinct, strong, and even *violent* personality' (her emphasis) that she once was and the "tranquille bourgeoise silencieuse, qui ne lit guère, qui pense peu, qui ne demande au lendemain rien de nouveau . . ." 'the distinct, strong, and even *violent* personality that she now claims to be (8). The younger self that emerges from the journal pages and from

Marthe's memories idolizes Mme Roland and George Sand (often referenced as a role model in both professional and personal spheres), and who also planned to write poetry and a novel akin to *Mauprat* (unsurprisingly, it intertwines issues of love, marriage, and education), yearned for new sensations and experiences and, in short, intended to "être quelqu'un" 'be someone' (39). The elder Marthe scarcely recognizes "[c]es élans de sentiment, [c]es soubresauts physiques, [c]es révoltes d'ambition, le besoin de la fortune, le goût de la célébrité" 'that emotional fervour and physical yearning, those ambitious impulses; the need for wealth, the taste for celebrity' as her own (7). The juxtaposition of these two Marthes, in tandem with the discovery of her husband's double life, leads to her decision to divorce Jean and reclaim her identity as "la Marthe d'autrefois."

The most intriguing aspect of the novel is its alternating between past and present; it gives shape to the plot and challenges the reader's attempts to reconcile these two different Marthes. As the heroine rages over Jean's betrayal and plots her revenge—briefly considering life in a convent and fantasizing about scenarios involving acid or a revolver—she is forced to confront a barrage of memories that evince the integral role that secrecy has played in her strategy for surmounting those obstacles that have thwarted her attempts to plot a course for her life. In route to her first meeting with the private investigator, she runs into the only man she ever loved (perhaps a bit too conveniently), Léon Delsarte, a wealthy young artist with whom she had a two-year affair. It is a pivotal moment in her coming to terms with Jean's deception: this brief encounter, like her reading of the journal entries, forces her to contemplate her younger self and leaves her "gênée dans mon droit d'enquête sur autrui par le poids de mes propres secrets" 'weighed down by my own secrets as I pursue my rightful investigation of someone else' (32).⁸ Later that day, she looks at a photograph of the Marthe that Léon knew; she then looks at herself in the mirror, trying to make sense of how her younger version could have become the image before her. She is now intent on restoring "dans ma mémoire la 'Marthe d'autrefois', qui avait eu cette autre conscience dont je retrouvais inopinément la clef" 'to my memory the "other Marthe" with that other consciousness to which I unexpectedly needed to find the key' (26).

What many excerpts reveal is that, for Prévost, secrets are tied to the unconscious, a connection he explored in an earlier novel, *L'automne d'une femme* (1893); it recounts the story of a love triangle among a forty-year-old married woman, Julie, a much younger man, Maurice, and a woman his age, Claire. A neurologist from the Salpêtrière, Dr. Daumier, said to be modeled after psychologist Pierre Janet, recommends a love-based marriage for Claire when she nearly dies of what Henri F. Ellenberger terms her "pathogenic

secret” (767)--passion for Maurice.⁹ Undoubtedly, her “inquiétude sentimentale” ‘emotional unrest’(287) is the cause of symptoms ranging from insomnia to a near-fatal nosebleed. In *Le jardin secret*, Prévost’s portrayal of Marthe’s discovery of the contents of Jean’s drawer shows that her quasi-hypnotic mental state is achieved by self-suggestion, as her eyes become fixed on Jean’s two shiny keys (the drawer’s and the apartment’s) inserted in the lock:

Even as I wrote, I was mesmerized by the curve of luminous steel that caught my eye as it disturbed my thoughts. When my eyes really *saw* the keys, I could no longer write. I did not yet know what I was suffering from, but I felt that an unforeseen event was taking place. Confused memories of being hypnotized with bright lights surged insistently back into my mind, which wanted nothing to do with them, which rejected such obstacles to other, more important, thoughts.¹⁰ (9)

Unable to tear her eyes away from the drawer, she tries to force her thoughts in a logical direction (Jean forgot his keys and perhaps will not need them . . .) to no avail, as the keys, strikingly, look back at her “avec les prunelles d’acier qu’y allumaient les reflets de la lampe” ‘with steely eyes illuminated by the lamp’s light’ (9). Much evidence exists that Prévost was interested in the idea of involuntary memory (later immortalized by Proust in *À la recherche du temps perdu*), as this later passage later illustrates: “Des pensées que j’avais eues *un certain jour*, ressuscitèrent dans mon cerveau et j’entendis des paroles qui avaient été dites autour de mes oreilles, et je vis des choses déjà vues, et mon cœur se serra de l’ancienne angoisse” ‘Thoughts that I had had *on a certain day* were rekindled in my mind and I heard words that had been said, and saw things I had seen, and a familiar despair tightened my heart’ (57; her emphasis).¹¹

As Marthe deals with the shock of her husband’s betrayal, she realizes that “[i]l y a des minutes dans la vie où il faut revivre toute sa vie; *où toute sa vie passée doit être la raison de l’action présente*” ‘there are moments when we must relive our entire lives; *when our past lives must be the reason for our present action*’ (25; her italics). Determining what to do about Jean’s secrets is therefore dependent upon looking back, with a critical eye, on her own life and, as it were, unforgetting. The first of Marthe’s secrets to emerge through a flashback concerns her father, who stole money from his employer to pay off a gambling debt. After being caught, he was sentenced to a year in prison. Coincidentally, Marthe’s father did not keep the crime from her, although she later kept it to herself out of fear that its disclosure would threaten her future; as Marthe puts it, “je me suis chargée de la cacher, de l’oublier, pour ma part, comme si elle avait été mienne” ‘I took it upon myself to hide it, to forget it, as if it were my own’ (28). Pardoned two weeks after imprisonment

and looking forward to a fresh start, Marthe's father moved his family to Paris, where Marthe soon quit her studies out of boredom—she had been attending l'École Normale de Sèvres thanks to a generous benefactor, Mme Garnier.¹² She began eking out a living as a tutor, a job that afforded her the freedom and independence she sought while allowing her to be nearer Léon. Theirs was a perfect love meant to culminate in marriage; however, he chose the financial option after his family threatened to cut off his substantial allowance if he married a woman below his station. It is significant that, during this phase of her life, Marthe was not only able to move past the troubles caused by her father, but also to rediscover “le goût de penser” ‘her love for thinking’ (29). It is as though Prévost were keen on demonstrating that giving a woman freedom to choose her own life and loves is what brings her happiness and fulfillment. With the help of the same benefactor—as close as we get to a mentor figure in this novel—who took Marthe under her wing after the family's arrival in Paris, a devastated Marthe set out to find a husband, both to get revenge against Léon and to secure herself a more stable situation.¹³ Jean was therefore a means to “me tirer de la pauvreté, du déclassement . . .” ‘free me from poverty, my station in life . . .’, as the narrator explains (46). The implementation of this plan required a series of lies about her father's criminal past, her need to make a living and, especially, her experience in love, notwithstanding her steadfast refusal to consummate the affair with Léon. In a discussion of pre-marital virginity in the *fin de siècle*, Diana Holmes emphasizes the importance of a young woman's purity of body and mind, affirming that “sexual ignorance seems to have been considered the counterpart of sexual innocence” (53). She mentions a comment Prévost makes in the preface to *Les demi-vierges*, that “l'intégrité absolue de l'épousée” ‘the bride's complete integrity’ could only be assured by her *not* being “renseignée comme un carabin sur certains mystères” ‘as knowledgeable about certain mysteries as a medical student’ (53). It is then no wonder that Marthe, with Mme Garnier's blessing, sought to establish “un mariage à base de tromperie grave” ‘a marriage based on deceit’, made possible after she inherited a sum of money for a small dowry (36). There is no doubt in her mind that if she had not kept her past a secret, Jean would have broken the engagement and would have looked for a girl from a less troubled family, with less experience in affairs of the heart and, most notably, with less dangerous ambitions. Secrecy thus provided Marthe leverage in arranging the only type of marriage open to her once a love match was no longer, in her view, an option. Although she knew little about Jean, he presumably knew even less about her, including her self-described intellectual superiority, one of her most guarded secrets.¹⁴

The old adage that one lie only leads to others could not be more

applicable to Marthe's life as a married woman. The fact that she found Jean unattractive forced her to further deception: in a flashback, as she prepares herself mentally for the inevitable marriage consummation, she observes that he is the least ugly of those men traveling with them, an appraisal that the eponymous heroine of Mauriac's *Thérèse Desqueyroux* would echo decades later.¹⁵ Once Marthe secured herself a husband, secrets about her previous experiences gave way to secrets about her true feelings. As the elder Marthe recalls the experience of losing her virginity, she identifies as hatred her predominant feeling for the man laying claim to her body: "S'il y eut jamais un secret grave entre lui et moi, ce fut bien cette haine exaspérée, au moment où il me vainquit. Et s'il y eut un mystère impénétrable dans mon cœur, c'est que ce cœur se soit, malgré tout, laissé asservir par ce qu'il avait le plus redouté et détesté" 'If there was ever a serious secret between us, it was the intense hatred I felt for him when he possessed me. And if my heart was harboring a mystery, it was that I allowed myself to be enslaved by what I had most feared and loathed' (41). The strong terms here ("haine," "vaincre," "asservir," "redouté," "détesté") starkly contrast those used to depict the passivity and complacency of the middle-aged Marthe. Likewise, the narrator mentions her promising Jean her "obéissance et fidélité" 'obedience and fidelity' though she was in reality dreaming of "révolte et . . . revanche. Et, dans l'heure même où je devenais femme, c'est à l'image et à la pensée d'un autre que je donnai ma nouveauté. Sur tout ce commencement d'union, l'arbre de mensonge a étendu son ombre" 'revolt and revenge. And, at the very hour that I became a woman, I was thinking of someone else to whom I offered my innocence. The tree of lies stretched its shadow over our marriage from the very beginning' (43). Marthe's negative portrayal of Jean fits Anne Sauvy's profile of the typical late nineteenth-century fictional husband, "un ennemi [si] déplaisant, vieux, désagréable [que l'on] sent presque, en filigrane, le 'droit' qu'a la femme de tromper un tel homme" 'such an old, unpleasant enemy that, between the lines, the woman's 'right' to deceive such a man is evident' (298). Twenty-five years later, Marthe's counterpart in Victor Margueritte's novel, *La Garçonne*, takes this rebellion to an extreme when she literally offers herself to the first man she meets after discovering that her fiancé, also the product of an arranged marriage, has been cheating on her.¹⁶

Nothing is new about arranged marriages and, particularly, about the reluctance a woman feels before her physical surrender to a man she does not love. Nowhere is this expressed more poignantly than in Marie d'Agoult's *Valentia*, whose heroine is so confused about what transpired on her wedding night (her much older husband drugged and raped her) that the only indications of her lost virginity are the paleness and tangled hair she sees in the mirror the morning after, along with her profound shame; all that stops her from

killing herself or her new husband is the absence of a weapon (24). What is striking about the trajectory Prévost charts for Marthe is the central role that secrecy plays in preserving a self that might otherwise become completely subsumed in that of her husband. By concealing potentially compromising information from her future husband, Marthe saves herself from a life of poverty and tribulations. She maintains a sense of self-worth and agency by hiding her true feelings for him. Even after her marriage to Jean, she continues to carve out a kind of inviolable private space by keeping things to and for herself—the “jardin secret” figuring the unconscious from which Marthe experiences the resurrection of her submerged, pre-marital self.

It is worth mentioning that, if Prévost had opted for a linear plot, tracing Marthe’s evolution—or rather, devolution—from an independent, ambitious girl to a dependent, complacent wife and mother, the text would have been somewhat akin to a reverse *roman de formation*. Instead, he shows the “after” Marthe first, as if to convince readers that she is a timid, inexperienced (even after thirteen years of marriage) Mme de Rênal type.¹⁷ He then undercuts the expectations created by that initial portrait of Marthe, a woman who questions her ability to endure even one night without her husband, by gradually, yet persistently, showing her, as the narrator dredges up memories, to be quite the opposite. She is a savvy, self-possessed woman who has managed all along to maintain some emotional and physical fulfillment, dabbling in harmless flirtations with not one, but a number of men: a doctor with whom she took strolls in the park; a gentleman who became her waltz partner; and a younger man whose advances she resisted because his affection for her, interestingly, was too tender and naïve for her taste, and with whom she seems to have enjoyed being a sexual tease, relishing the fact that the kiss she bestowed on his cheek was “la plus grande faveur qu’il ait jamais eue de moi” ‘the biggest favor I ever did for him’ (47). In these relationships, it was Marthe who helped orchestrate the rendezvous, set the boundaries, and reaped the benefits of involvement with men of her own choosing (as opposed to a man whom circumstances imposed on her) while drawing the line at becoming physically intimate, a step that she was not yet willing to take. Keeping secrets, in short, enabled Marthe to achieve a power balance in a dynamic that was, by definition, unbalanced.

Those relationships were but dalliances hardly worthy of secrecy in comparison to Marthe’s final, more dangerous liaison with a womanizing captain named Landouzie, for whom she was all too eager to shed her guise of “honnête femme.” She indeed admits that when he came along, she had a real need for adultery, having become utterly weary of Jean, family life and, notably, her own passivity. As with the other men, she steadily resisted Landouzie’s attempts to bed her until he was called up for military service

and she saw that yielding to him was a way to tie him down. It is important to note that Marthe took such an active step to meet her own needs. In so doing, she resembles the heroine of Marcelle Tinayre's *La rebelle*, a woman so adamant about her right to a fulfilling love relationship that she has an adulterous affair that results in a child whom she passes off, with no regrets, as her husband's. Attempting to pin down what compelled her to take this step with Landouzie, Marthe states that something in her "qui n'est pas uniquement un vil désir, veut qu'elle avance, qu'elle arrive au bout du chemin. Plutôt que du vil désir et de la perversité, il me semble que ce fut, chez moi, l'impérieux besoin d'apaiser une inquiétude accrue peu à peu jusqu'à devenir intolérable. . . ." 'something that was not just base desire induced her to move forward, to see it through. Instead of base desire and corruption, I think it was an urgent need to calm an anxiety that had gradually grown until it became intolerable . . .' (57). Her advancing age makes yielding to her desire all the more imperative: "Quelle femme, vers la fin de cet automne qui dure de trente à quarante ans, n'a songé avec angoisse que cela va être fini d'être jeune, d'être un objet de tendresse, et que le temps passe et n'apporte rien?" 'What woman, toward the end of an autumn that lasts from age thirty to forty, has not felt the anguish of knowing that being young and worthy of affection is over, and that time is passing without bringing anything new?' (57).¹⁸

The recollection of the Landouzie episode leaves no doubt that "l'autre Marthe," supposedly stifled after marriage, remained alive long after that decisive event. Not only was she ripe for a fully adulterous relationship this time, but she was also attracted to the very qualities in Landouzie that would otherwise have terrified the timid, submissive Marthe whom the narrator privileges in the novel's opening pages:

[an] authority imposed by his eyes, a strong, violent elegance in his gestures, a tender brutality in his words. . . . There was an agitation that comes from feeling perfectly understood by a man who had experienced a lot of women. . . . There was perhaps (I hate to admit it) a strange gratitude for the moral decline that I already owed him.¹⁹ (57-58)

A Valmont type, Landouzie wanted to uncover the "coin gâté qu'il y a dans toute Eve," 'spoiled part in every Eve' allegedly preferring "la volupté plus rare de tenir une vie honnête et une imagination chaste" 'the singular pleasure of being in control of an honest life and a chaste imagination' to physically possessing her (50). He boasted of making her more than a mistress by appropriating "certaines régions de votre pensée où votre mari n'osera jamais accéder, et que vous-même vous ne soupçonnez pas" 'certain areas of your thinking to which your husband does not dare to seek access, of whose existence you are not even aware' (50). As Marthe puts it,

“il a contraint ma pensée à ce qu’une honnête femme, pour rester telle, doit éternellement ignorer. Et cette autre Marthe, une fois créée en moi, n’est plus disparue. Il m’est resté de la ‘matière à pensée impure’ que je ne possédais pas avant” ‘he trained my thoughts on things that an honest woman, if she intends to remain so, must never know about; the other Marthe, once created, never disappeared. “Impure thoughts,” which I did not previously have, remain in me’ (50-51). Clearly, the affair with Landouzie, the last in a long line of secrets kept from an unsuspecting Jean and by her conveniently “forgotten,” resulted in the creation of yet another Marthe who is quite different from the young Marthe referenced elsewhere, though the narrating Marthe uses the same term for all of them. It is also clear that conjuring up this final secret marks a turning point for her when she realizes that what she stood to lose with Landouzie—her innocence, her most intimate thoughts—was a larger threat to her well-being than her husband’s sedating effect. Interestingly, it was Landouzie’s own philandering that saved her from becoming yet another notch in his belt: upon arriving at his doorstep to offer herself, Marthe learned that he had been dishonorably dispatched to Charleville, after being caught in an affair with a general’s wife.

With the Landouzie segment of Marthe’s past in mind, Jean’s rather run-of-the-mill secrets pale in comparison to hers, especially given the double standard regarding acceptable behavior for married men and women. As Marthe’s secrets have gradually surfaced in concert with her dogged attempt to uncover Jean’s, in creating a narrative of his other life, a process that has lifted her out of her marital stupor and led her into the office of a detective and to her husband’s secret love nest, she comes to an astonishing realization: her relative contentment in marriage may be attributed to nothing less than Jean’s and her own lying. Put bluntly, secrets are the key to a successful marriage, the only way to make the union of an older, experienced man with a younger, inexperienced woman work: “Malgré le mensonge ou plutôt par le mensonge originel” ‘Despite the lying, or rather, because of the very first lie’, Marthe notes, “nous avons été un bon ménage, nous avons été heureux” ‘we have had a good marriage, we have been happy’ (44). Confession only causes harm. During her affair with Landouzie, Marthe considered following the advice Michelet offers in *L’Amour*, to confess and ask her husband for help, before concluding that doing so would only earn her Jean’s scorn and annoyance.²⁰ The only confession she is willing to make is to herself and her readers: “Ceci doit être une confession, ou rien” ‘This must be a confession, or nothing’, she avers when tempted to withhold self-incriminating information (48). To Marthe’s way of thinking, lying compensates for flaws in the two spouses: since she and Jean were not perfect marital partners, “il fallait se mentir l’un à l’autre, ou se quitter. Au fond de ces mensonges, il n’y a pas

seulement de l'égoïsme, il y a surtout la miséricorde humaine; il y a comme une humble charité. C'est le mariage qui est trop parfait pour l'infirmité de nos âmes" 'we *had to* lie to each other, or leave. Beneath all the lies, there is not only selfishness, there is above all forgiveness, simple charity. Marriage is too perfect for the frailness of our souls' (61; her italics). It is hard to imagine secrecy cast in a more positive light: "Herbes parasites ou plantes vénéneuses" 'Invasive weeds or poisonous plants', Marthe notes, "quelle femme, quel mari n'a pas son "Jardin secret," ou l'autre jamais ne pénètre, ou il ne *doit* pas pénétrer sous peine de détruire le foyer?" 'what wife, what husband does not have a "Secret Garden" that the other never enters, *must not* enter to avoid the risk of destroying everything?' (61; her italics). It is not just a question of creating a more balanced relationship through lying, one which, as we now understand, accounts for her relative contentment at the outset, but one of protecting the relationship once it is established because honesty, a mainstay of marital vows, paradoxically annihilates the family unit. A main character in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) expresses a similar view when stating that "the one charm of marriage is that it makes a life of deception absolutely necessary for both parties."²¹

Marthe ultimately abandons her quest for revenge, vowing at the novel's end to toss the key to Jean's secret apartment, which she obtained by bribing the concierge, into the Seine River. The conclusion that she has drawn from days of introspection is that she has no such right and, more important, that simply reassuming the identity of "l'autre Marthe" is not the option she once thought it was. "Je ne suis plus la même Marthe" 'I am no longer the same Marthe', she writes, "[j]'ai touché le fond de l'abîme, et je suis remontée à la surface" 'I reached the bottom of the abyss and have climbed back to the surface' (61). All the chronological back steps culminate in one dramatic step forward as she sets fire to everything tied to her secrets, including her all-important journal, and proclaims that "l'autre Marthe se suicide" 'the other Marthe is committing suicide' (62). While she mourns the loss of the other Marthe, something new arises in "cet autodafé" 'this auto-da-fé', as evidenced by her declaration that "[c]'est aujourd'hui, seulement d'aujourd'hui, que je suis vraiment MARIÉE" 'it is only starting today that I am truly MARRIED' (capitalization hers)—the advance in *Le jardin secret* over *L'automne d'une femme* is that Marthe does not require a doctor to cure her because she cures herself (61-62). To mark this transition to a new phase in her life as Jean's wife and to bring the plot full circle, Prévost has his heroine again check on her sleeping daughter, whose eyes, unlike that first night, are now closed, signifying the innate secretiveness of human nature with which our newly self-aware Marthe is now at peace.²² Her insistence on forever keeping to herself Jean's secrets confirms her commitment to her belief in secrecy as

the only way for a marriage not grounded in love to survive. Indeed, she casts herself in the role of a sort of high priestess of conjugal secrecy:

In marriage, I am like the priest of a religion sullied by deception and error who, in good faith, discovers that miracles are tricks and that doctrine is false. What does the priest do? If he determines that this deceptive religion is beneficial all the same, if he is able to confer temporary comfort and happiness, is he not better off remaining a priest? Yes.²³ (62)

The singularity of Marthe's theory is reflected graphically by the unusual cover (surely meant to sell more books) of the novel's Select-Collection edition, which shows a slightly deranged-looking Marthe in a "see no evil, hear no evil" pose, with her hand over one ear and the other partially covering one eye.

A reviewer of the novel for a 1898 issue of *Literature: An International Gazette of Criticism*, after enthusing that not only *Le jardin secret* is Prévost's best novel to date, but that it also "gives ground for hope that its author is soon to be recognized as one of the masters of French prose, and a sure candidate for the Academy" commends Prévost for his ability to adapt life to "delicate ears without being reduced to vulgar expurgation." This undoubtedly male reviewer is particularly impressed by Marthe, "the amiable and serious little Frenchwoman, whom [Prévost] depicts as so disturbed by her husband's infidelity that she dreams of revolt," but who has the sense, in the end, to pardon him. The reviewer is so happy about the restitution of traditional gender roles that he entirely misses the novel's point. As this analysis has shown, Marthe dreams of revolt long before (and long after) marrying Jean; she forgives him not because she comes to her senses or decides he deserves it, but because she has kept just as many secrets. Secrecy has afforded them parity in a dynamic that was, from the outset, fundamentally ill-matched. Thus Christine Boily Petcoff's contention that Prévost's work generally presents "une forme particulière de féminisme qui se veut très ouverte et avant-gardiste mais qui en fait adopte toujours les attitudes du discours patriarcal" 'a particular kind of feminism that sets out to be very open and avant-garde, but that always ends up adopting a patriarchal stance' does not apply to *Le jardin secret*, whose heroine's "tangled web" could instead be considered an indictment, not an adoption, of those patriarchal attitudes (62). It is also a creative way to empower the *fin-de-siècle* woman who lacks access to a workplace that will increasingly provide her counterparts in years to come other opportunities for self-actualization.

Notes

¹ Daniel Lesueur (pseudonym for Jeanne Loiseau) offers a more scathing indictment of women's education in *Névrosee*, a novel whose heroine's devotion to intellectual pursuits results in a miscarriage, a nervous breakdown, and death from a drug overdose. See Michael R. Finn's analysis of the "supposedly anomalous function of the female brain which left it vulnerable to nervous exhaustion and to potential breakdown" in novels by Lesueur, Rachilde, Georges de Peyrebrune, and in Georgette Déga 1898 medical thesis *Essai sur la cure préventive de l'hystérie féminine par l'éducation*.

² All translations in this article are my own.

³ That Prévost would argue for women's empowerment is intriguing given his often condescending comments about women in a lengthy essay on feminism, where he states that "[l]a femme, serve de l'homme, développa son intelligence dans le sens étroit, égoïste, de l'esclave qui tâche d'accommoder au mieux sa vie près du maître. . . . L'intelligence des femmes dans le sens de puissance directrice, créatrice, peut donc être considérée comme habituellement inexercée depuis les origines. . . ." ("Le féminisme" 325). Shortly thereafter, he adds that "les conditions sociales de la femme à travers les âges se sont unies aux conditions physiologiques pour lui inspirer la morale que Nietzsche appelle assez dédaigneusement la 'morale des esclaves'" (326).

⁴ "La vertu secrète du mariage, qui le fait durer, a si bien adapté ces deux êtres l'un à l'autre, que la femme a pris les idées, les opinions, les goûts et les dégoûts du mari. . . . Tout ce qui était personnel à la jeune fille, ses pauvres petits désirs, ses pauvres petites aspirations, son pauvre petit trésor caché, méconnu, stérile, a disparu."

⁵ "La Marthe d'autrefois," or its close equivalent, is so often referenced (6 [twice], 7, 14, 26, 27, 30, 33; "l'autre Marthe" 6, 9, 50, 61; "l'ancienne Marthe" 6; "la Marthe révoltée" 61) that it becomes a veritable leitmotif in the novel.

⁶ Marthe's situation recalls that of Bluebeard's wife in Perrault's famous *conte*. Bluebeard gives his wife the keys to his castle, admonishing her not to enter one specific room. Like Marthe, she is unable to resist the temptation to know what is inside. Opening the door, she discovers the bloody remains of his previous wives. She drops the key and flees. When Bluebeard returns and finds the bloody key, he threatens to kill her, but is kept from doing so by the wife's brothers, who

arrive in the nick of time and kill him.

⁷ It is worth mentioning that for Marthe, “keeping secrets” and “telling lies”—both phrases omnipresent in the novel—are interchangeable.

⁸ This is not the only time the narrator uses the term “enquête” (she states elsewhere her desire to “loyalement mener l’enquête à bout” [27]), the carrying out of which helps her to decide what next to do and provides a “procès-verbal de la crise que je traverse” that might eventually allow her to explain to her daughter her decision to divorce Jean (27). To meet this objective, she says that she must return to the beginning of her “vie intelligente,” similar to Mauriac’s Thérèse Desqueyroux, who is desperate to “remont[er] . . . jusqu’à son enfance” in order to discover “le commencement de [son] acte” (25-27), that is, the act of poisoning her husband. Another example, this time in theater, of an investigation related to identity, is Jean Anouilh’s 1936 *Le voyageur sans bagage*, about a man who returns from World War I an amnesiac and who, when his probable family seems to want to hide certain grim details about his past, declares that “[n]ous sommes là pour enquêter comme des policiers—avec une rigueur et, si possible, une insensibilité de policiers” (50). In these cases, the imperative is to create a narrative that makes sense, to explain how a person evolves into someone else.

⁹ Pierre Janet (1859-1947), considered among the founding fathers of the field of psychology, along with William James and Wilhelm Wundt, carried out groundbreaking work on dissociation and traumatic memory, claiming to have found a link between past events and present trauma. He studied under Charcot and influenced Freud, Adler, and Jung. Henri F. Ellenberger mentions Dr. Daumier’s “extremely skillful psychotherapeutic treatments with methods reminiscent of Janet’s” (348) and those of Austrian neurologist Moritz Benedikt who concluded that “with the probing for the patient’s secret problems while in a conscious state . . . the cure [can be] achieved by helping him to solve these problems” (767). Mark S. Micale labels Prévost “one of the major originators of the Modernist ‘psychological novel’ in France” and *L’automne d’une femme* “arguably the finest *roman à l’hystérie* of its generation” (76).

¹⁰ “Tout en écrivant, j’avais subi la suggestion attractive de cette courbe d’acier lumineuse, qui sollicitait mon regard en gênant ma pensée. Quand mes yeux *virent* réellement les clefs, la possibilité

de continuer à écrire cessa. . . . Je ne savais pas encore de quoi je souffrais, pourtant je sentais que l'accident redouté allait se produire, qu'il se produisait. . . . Des souvenirs confus sur l'hynotisme par les points brillants refluaient obstinément dans mon cerveau, qui n'en voulait pas, qui les rejetait comme des obstacles à d'autres pensées plus nécessaires."

¹¹ There is no ignoring the parallels between certain of Pré-vost's passages and Proust's famous madeleine one: something comes over Marcel when he dips the cake into his tea, compelling him to identify what he terms "la vérité." Just as Marthe, he tries to force his mind to cooperate ("Je pose la tasse et me tourne vers mon esprit. C'est à lui de trouver la vérité. Mais comment?" [45]), striving to recapture the moment: "Je rétrograde par la pensée au moment où je pris la première cuillerée de thé. Je retrouve le même état, sans une clarté nouvelle. Je demande à mon esprit un effort de plus . . . , j'écarte tout obstacle, toute idée étrangère. . . ." (46). As he is about to abandon his quest, he recalls the tea and madeleine that Tante Léonie would give him on Sunday mornings in Combray. The narrator concludes that "quand d'un passé ancien rien de subsiste . . . seules . . . l'odeur et la saveur restent encore longtemps, comme des âmes, à se rappeler, à attendre, à espérer, sur la ruine de tout le reste, à porter sans fléchir, sur leur gouttelette presque impalpable, l'édifice immense du souvenir" (46).

¹² Gabrielle Réval, one of the first young women to attend the school, depicts the lives of students and teachers in *Les Sévriennes* (1900).

¹³ Marthe feels nothing but disdain toward her mother, stressing her lack of education and mocking her Gascon accent by calling her "un grillon du Midi" (27). Mothers in many Belle Époque "novels of professional development" (Juliette M. Rogers's term) may not be very influential, but they are certainly not cast in a completely negative light. These novels instead focus on female mentors who assist the heroines in navigating a workplace still male dominated. See, for example, Marcelle Tinayre's *La rebelle* (1905), Colette Yver's *Princesses de science* (1907) and *Les dames du palais* (1909).

¹⁴ Marthe is not the first heroine to become aware of her intellectual superiority over a man. The eponymous heroine of Marie d'Agoult's semi-autobiographical 1846 novel, *Nélida* (an anagram for

Daniel Stern, d'Agoult's pen name), sets out to develop her mind when her lover, Guermann, effectively abandons her while promoting himself as an artist. Reading her journal, he is astounded by her intellectual development, and particularly by her ability to see through him: "[il se voyait deviné, compris, jugé, par un orgueil plus grand que le sien, par un esprit d'une force qu'il n'avait pas soupçonnée. La femme qui avait été son esclave s'était affranchie. . . . (190). The reader familiar with *Thérèse Desqueyroux* will also recall that "l'intelligence de Thérèse était fameuse. . . . A vingt-six ans, Bernard Desqueyroux . . . épouserait la fille la plus riche et la plus intelligente de la lande, peut-être pas la plus jolie, 'mais on ne se demande pas si elle est jolie ou laide, on subit son charme'" (32).

¹⁵ Reflecting on why she married Bernard, Thérèse realizes that he was "plus fin que la plupart des garçons que j'eusse pu épouser"; "[a]dolescent, il n'était point si laid, cet Hippolyte mal léché. . . ." (32-33). Stendhal's Mme de Rênal felt similarly toward her husband, whom she found "beaucoup moins ennuyeux que tous les hommes de sa connaissance" (43). Generation after generation, women are forced to accept (then rationalize) a fate not of their choosing.

¹⁶ The raw description of Monique's physical surrender to this man was surely tied to the decision to withdraw Margueritte's Légion d'honneur. To survive the ordeal, she must completely separate mind and body: "Alors elle serrait les dents, pour ne rien livrer d'elle, que sa chair. Un âcre plaisir de vengeance la transportait, si plénier que toute pudeur en était, au fond de l'être, abolie" (117).

¹⁷ The narrator of *Le rouge et le noir* describes Mme de Rênal as "une âme naïve, qui jamais ne s'était élevée même jusqu'à juger son mari, et à s'avouer qu'il l'ennuyait" (43).

¹⁸ Prévost delves more extensively into the subject of the aging woman in love in *L'Automne d'une femme*. See Christiansen for an extended treatment of this subject as it relates to illness.

¹⁹ "[une] domination exercée par les yeux . . . [une] grâce robuste, violente, des gestes, et . . . une sorte de brutalité tendre dans la parole. . . . C'était l'émoi de se sentir trop bien comprise par un homme qui avait expérimenté beaucoup d'autres femmes. . . . C'était peut-être (l'aveu m'en coûte) une mauvaise gratitude, pour la déchéance morale que je lui devais déjà."

²⁰ Mme de Lafayette's *Princesse de Clèves* (*La Princesse de Clèves*,

1678) finds herself in a similar quandary.

²¹ Lord Henry continues: “I never know where my wife is, and my wife never knows what I am doing. When we meet,—we do meet occasionally, when we dine out together, or go down to the duke’s,—we tell each other the most absurd stories with the most serious faces. My wife is very good at it,—much better, in fact, than I am. She never gets confused over her dates, and I always do. But when she does find me out, she makes no row at all. I sometimes wish she would; but she merely laughs at me.” Marthe takes pleasure in recounting to Jean her interactions with various men at the salons she frequents, and particularly in leading him astray, confessing that “je l’ai dérouté à plaisir par de fausses confidences” (48).

²² Yvonne is poised to carry on the family tradition; she repeatedly tells harmless fibs and keeps secrets about her activities. Her mother recognizes what she is doing, but says nothing, simply acknowledging “[t]oi aussi, tu as des secrets. Ils sont enfantins et puérils aujourd’hui; demain ils seront graves. Encore un peu de temps, et l’amour s’y mêlera. Alors, même innocente, tu tromperas ta mère, un peu, comme ta mère a trompé son mari—un peu!” (60).

²³ “Je suis à peu près, dans le mariage, comme un prêtre d’une religion entachée de supercheries et d’erreurs, qui, d’abord de bonne foi, viendrait par la suite à découvrir la tricherie des miracles et le mensonge des doctrines. Que faire? S’il constate que cette religion menteuse et tricheuse est tout de même bienfaisante, répand la consolation et le bonheur provisoires, ne fera-t-il pas mieux d’en rester le prêtre? Oui. . . .”

Works Cited

- Anouilh, Jean. *Le voyageur sans bagage*. Paris: La Table Ronde, 1958. Print.
- Christiansen, Hope. “(Sick) Love and the Older Woman in Marcel Prévost’s *L’automne d’une femme*.” *Romance Quarterly* 62.1 (2015): 38-49. Print.
- Ellenberger, Henri F. *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*. New York: Basic Books, 1970. Print.
- Finn, Michael R. “Physiological Fictions and the Fin-de-Siècle Female Brain.” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 39.3-4 (Spring-Summer 2011): 315-31. Print.
- “Foreign Letters. France.” *Literature: An International Gazette of Criticism*. Vol. 3. 24 December 1898. Web. 14 July 2016.
- Holmes, Diana. “*Quel fleuve noir nous emportait . . .*: Sex and the Woman Reader at the *fin-de-siècle*.” *Nottingham French Studies* 37 (1998): 51-69. Print.
- Lyle, Louise. “Maternity and Cultural Reproductions in *fin de siècle* French

-
- Fictions." *French Studies Bulletin* 104 (2007): 58-61. Print.
- Margueritte, Victor. *La garçonne*. Paris: Flammarion, 1922. Print.
- Mauriac, François. *Thérèse Desqueyroux*. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1927. Print.
- Micale, Mark S. "Discourses of Hysteria in Fin-de-Siècle France." *The Mind of Modernism: Medicine, Psychology, and the Cultural Arts in Europe and America, 1880-1940*. Ed. Mark S. Micale. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004. 71-92. Print.
- Petcoff, Christine Boily. "Le féminisme de Marcel Prévost ou l'art de la mystification." *Paroles gelées* 12.1 (1994): 61-73. Print.
- Prévost, Marcel. "Le féminisme." *La femme dans la nature, dans les mœurs, dans la légende, dans la société: tableau de son évolution physique et psychique*. Victor du Bled et al. Paris: Bong et Cie., 1908. Vol. 4: 319-48. Print.
- . *Le jardin secret*. Select-Collection 118. Paris: Flammarion, 1937. Print.
- Proust, Marcel. *Du côté de chez Swann*. Paris: Gallimard, 1987. Print.
- Rogers, Juliette M. *Career Stories: Belle Époque Novels of Professional Development*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State UP, 2007. Print.
- Sauvy, Anne. "Mariage de convenance, mariage d'argent et mariage d'amour: Le reflet d'un phénomène social dans la littérature romanesque des XIX^e et XX^e siècles." *Le roman sentimental*. Ed. Ellen Constans. Limoges: Trames, 1990. 285-300. Print.
- Stendhal. *Le rouge et le noir*. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1964. Print.
- Stern, Daniel. *Nélida*. Roman. Éd. Charles F. Dupêchez. Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1987. Print.
- . *Valentia, Hervé, Julien, La boîte aux lettres, Ninon au couvent*. Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1896. Print.
- Tinayre, Marcelle. *La femme et son secret*. Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1933. Print.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Planet Publish. Web. 14 July 2016.